

# TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

## SUPPORT MATERIALS - GMGY



## WHAT IS A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE?

When someone talks about something being controversial, it usually means that it involves more than just simple disagreement between people. In general terms, controversial issues can be described as being:

- Issues that deeply divide society
- Issues that challenge personally held values and beliefs (for example strong political positions)
- Issues that generate conflicting explanations (for example historical events)
- Issues that evoke an emotional response
- Issues that may cause students to feel threatened and confused.

## WHY TEACH ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

***“Schools should help their students to handle questions of value, to learn to make judgements which are truly their own, as well as learning to take responsibility for their own lives” (Dewhurst, 1992).***

The ‘We Are a Community National School’ strand of the Goodness Me, Goodness You! curriculum is firmly based on concepts citizenship, human rights, equality and their associated values. Although these concepts are widely supported in society they may be controversial in certain contexts.



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GMGY advocates for the need for young people to understand equality and know their rights, to understand both how they should be treated, and how they should treat others. Teaching about equality and human rights helps to create a safe place for children to explore, discuss, challenge and form their own opinions and values.

The knowledge and respect of rights that children gain from this, combined with understanding, respect and tolerance for difference, can empower them to tackle prejudice, improve relationships and live their lives to the full. In our ever more diverse society, it becomes more important to support children in developing positive and open-minded attitudes.

GMGY supports the characteristic spirit of Community National Schools by helping pupil's to develop their own values, while also developing an understanding and appreciation for the values of their school. Schools have a role in helping pupils, including those from minority and disadvantaged groups, to learn about themselves and their differences from others in a way that is positive and affirming of diverse identities. Schools can also play an important role in helping pupils to understand the causes of inequality and empower them to oppose these inequalities.

In addition to the GMGY curriculum, the characteristic spirit of the school can contribute to the values of pupils through the expectations and standards of behaviour set for pupils and through its practices and procedures in all areas of school life.



## FACTORS WHICH MAKE AN ISSUE CONTRIVERSIAL

What might be controversial in one school, with a particular group of children coming from a particular community, may be totally uncontroversial in a different context or at a different time. The following factors may affect whether an issue is controversial or not.



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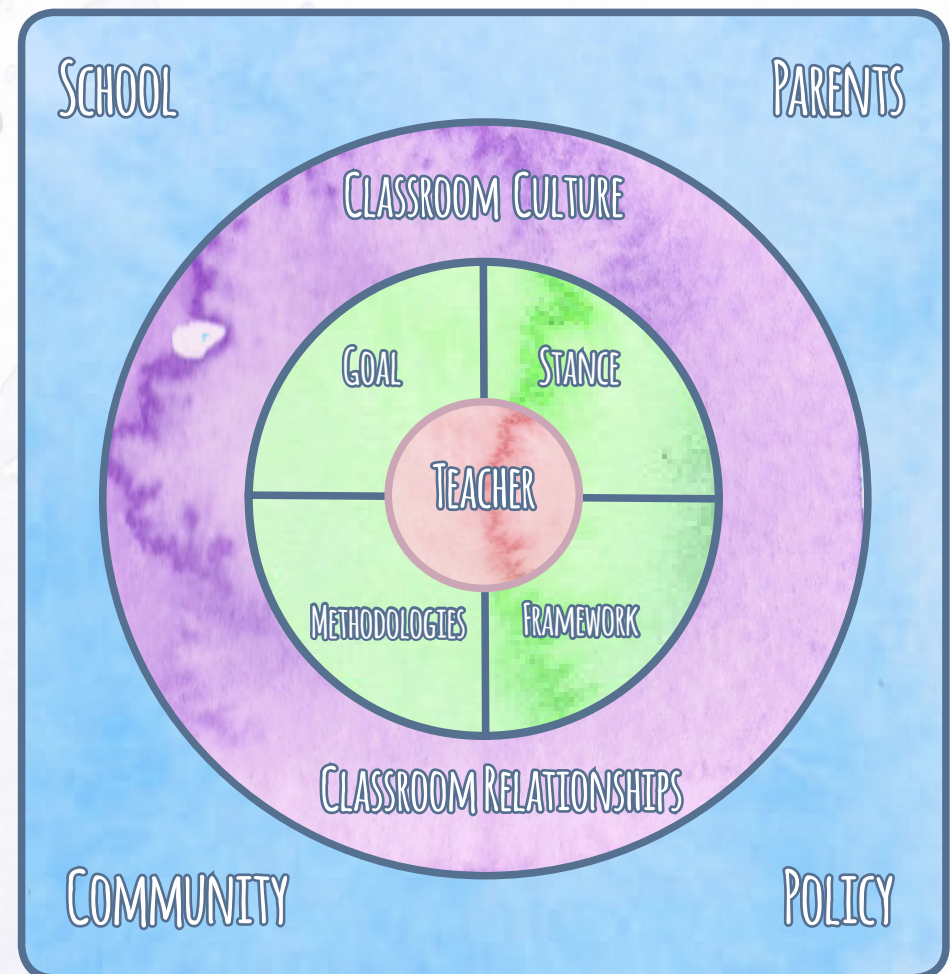
### A MODEL FOR TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The model promoted in this teaching controversial issues support material has been developed by Lesley Emerson from the School of Education in Queen's University, Belfast (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012). It is based on the premise that the teaching of controversial issues must begin with an acknowledgement that as a classroom teacher you often have little control of the context within which you work. As the diagram in Figure 1 illustrates, teachers operate in a classroom context which is influenced by school ethos, parental expectations, community context, and educational policy – factors over which you may have very little influence or control.

However, you can influence the culture of your own classroom and the relationships established within it. Therefore, when thinking about classroom based teaching of controversial issues, we need to start with considering factors over which you, as a teacher, have immediate influence. The following sections will consider the following:

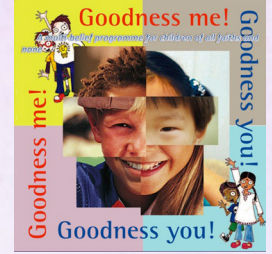
- Your overall aim in teaching controversial issues
- The values which underpin the teaching and learning of these issues
- Your goal in relation to specific issues
- The stance or position that you, as a teacher, take on specific issues
- The frameworks you use to explore the issues
- The classroom methodologies you select.

Figure 1. A model for teaching contriversional issues (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012)



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## HOW CAN YOU PREPARE YOUR CLASS FOR DISCUSSION OF A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE?

It is essential that, before you begin, you have established a safe space within your classroom. The development of a class contract or set of ground rules for group discussion is normal practice within the CNS classroom. In introducing controversial issues into the classroom, it is important to have a safe and fair environment where issues can be freely discussed, but where it is also recognised that freedom of expression must be tempered by human rights values, the code of behaviour of the school and respect for each other. It is strongly recommended that students spend time in developing a class agreement, which encompasses values as well as behaviours (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012).

A simple way of agreeing core values is to ask the children to work in groups of three to answer the questions:

1. How would you like to be treated by other classmates when you are working together in class?
2. How should we treat each other when we disagree about serious issues?
3. What are your rights and responsibilities as a member of the class?

Take feedback from each group, listing all their suggestions on the board. It is likely that children will include ideas such as; being respected, being listened to, not being put down or dismissed, tolerance of different ideas, co-operation, taking turns, participation and allowing others to disagree with the majority.

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## WHAT STANCE SHOULD I TAKE WHEN TEACHING A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE?

It is important to consider what stance or position you as the teacher will take in relation to a particular issue. Depending on the issue and the context in which you are teaching, any one of a number of teacher stances may be appropriate.

- 1. Neutral Facilitator or Impartial Facilitator:** You act as a neutral facilitator at all times – never expressing a personal view at all. Related to this is the impartial stance, where you recognise that while you have your own views, you provide a fair and balanced representation of a wide range of perspectives.
- 2. Declared Interests:** You state your position on an issue, particularly if you have strong views on it - so that the students know where you stand.
- 3. Devil's Advocate:** You deliberately express a view contrary to the view of the class, in a situation where there is consensus among the students on a certain issue. This allows the airing of more perspectives on the issue.
- 4. Official View:** You take the official view – representing the views of the school or the community.
- 5. Ally:** You support the views of a student who holds a minority view within the class, to ensure his or her view is given due weight. You become his or her ally.

## HOW SHOULD I FRAME A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE?

The way in which you frame a controversial topic can make a considerable difference to providing safety and confidence for both you and your pupils in exploring controversial issues. The basic principle behind this approach is that you look at issues from a structural rather than a personal perspective. This means that you can discuss an issue without making either you or your pupils vulnerable or putting them under pressure to reveal their personal views, especially when doing so could expose them to strong reactions from others. It also makes it easier to discuss issues which personally affect some pupils in the class, without making them vulnerable or having them become the target of the discussion.

The following section looks at the broader framing of controversial issues. The following three structural frameworks are appropriate ones to use within GMGY, because they are based on principles either embedded in law or generally held in society. They are Human Rights, Law, and Social Responsibility.

### A Human Rights Framework

Human rights, as embodied in the UNDHR, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other HR declarations and conventions, can be used to frame controversial topics. This provides a universally agreed foundation for examining controversial issues and allows students to look at how rights can be balanced in conflicting situations. It also means that issues can be viewed from a structural perspective rather than that of personal beliefs or morals.

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### **A Legal Framework**

Presenting topics within a legal framework (e.g. what the law says) can allow space for students to present their own moral perspectives, but within a context of the state's responsibility towards all its citizens.

### **A Social Responsibility Framework**

A social responsibility framework can also be used to structure topics, for example by looking at the roles of the individual, society and the state in relation to addressing controversial issues such as racism, poverty, or homophobia.

This structural approach to teaching controversial issues potentially creates opportunities to safely challenge both the actions and attitudes of pupils without shining a light on the position of any individual pupil within the classroom.

## WHAT METHODOLOGIES COULD I USE FOR TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

**The following methodologies have been adapted from *Tackling Controversial Issues* (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012) and *The Enquiring Classroom Erasmus+ Project Handbook* (O'Donnell, A., Kieran, P., Cherouvis, S., Bergdahl, L. and Langmann, E., 2019).**

### **Recording Points of Consensus and Disagreement**

Take time to acknowledge and record agreement: this will prevent the discussion from becoming overly repetitive. Take time to acknowledge and record disagreement: this will prevent the discussion from getting bogged down. It also demonstrates to students that contrasting perspectives are a normal aspect of dealing with difficult issues.

### **Time Out**

Establish a clear procedure for handling heated situations. For example, if a class is becoming heated call a 'time out'. Pupils should know that this means they need to, for example, individually reflect on the class so far, write down why they think it has become heated and how they think the class should proceed from this point. The pupils can then share their ideas for moving forward.

### **Reflective Templates**

At the end of a class students should be given time to individually reflect on what they have been discussing. It is helpful to have a standard format or template that they can routinely use in each class.

### **No Easy Answers Board**

Create a 'No Easy Answers Board' for recording difficult questions or points on which the students cannot agree. This acts as a reminder to pupils that no-one has all the answers, and that in life, it is not realistic to expect that groups will agree on everything. These questions or points can be returned to at various intervals to see if students' thoughts have developed since they first discussed them.

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### **Graffiti Wall**

Dedicate one area of your room as a 'Graffiti Wall' where pupils can record their thoughts on the issues they have been discussing. You could also record any relevant comments made during summaries or de-briefings. Pupils could also record other issues that they would be interested in examining in future classes, or their thoughts on current affairs issues as they arise.

### **Carousel Discussion**

Split class into two groups. One group should form an inner circle (seated or standing) and the other group forms an outer circle. Students should be facing each other. Pose a question to the class. The pairs facing each other should exchange views for approximately one minute. Then ask the outer circle to rotate clockwise. Ask this new pair to discuss the question. Continue the rotation until students have had an opportunity to discuss the question with a wide range of partners. During these rotations increase the time available for discussion and encourage students to reflect the views they have heard from others. This encourages them to synthesise ideas and share the opinions of others. De-brief the activity: Did your opinion change in any way during the carousel? Did you make stronger arguments as you moved to new partners? Did you pick up any interesting views?

### **Jigsaw Discussion**

The basic idea of this methodology is that the pupils are divided into groups of four or five. This is their home group. Each member of the home group is numbered 1-5. All the 1s from the home group meet to discuss one aspect of the topic, all the 2s another, and so on. Finally the home groups reassemble and each member provides feedback from their topic group,

thus enabling the home groups to hear multiple perspectives on the same issue.

### **Speed Debates**

Give each pupil a post-it note or small card. Display a statement to the class relating to the topic you are studying. The statements should be easily understood, but should be selected on the basis that they will invite a degree of disagreement amongst the class e.g. 'War is never acceptable'. Ask the pupils to reflect on the statement and to write down on their post-it a number between 1 and 5 based on this scale: 1 means 'Agree strongly', 2 means 'Agree', 3 means 'Not sure', 4 means 'Disagree', 5 means 'Disagree strongly'. Now ask the students to show their numbers to each other, to find someone with a different number to them (preferably as different as possible) and to join that person in a pair. The pair then have 2 minutes to discuss why they chose the number they did for the statement. Take brief feedback. Ask if anyone would change their number and why.

### **Walking Debates**

Make 3 large signs AGREE, DISAGREE, NOT SURE. Place the Agree and Disagree signs at opposite ends of the room, with the NOT SURE sign in the middle, as if along an imaginary line. Read out one of the statements for discussion and ask the students to stand nearest the sign that reflects their opinion on the topic. Emphasise that it is okay to stay in the middle, listen to the debate and then move according as their opinion is formed. When students have taken a position ask them to say why they have taken that position. Encourage dialogue /debate among students to persuade those who don't share their opinion to change sides.

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### Spectrum Debate

This allows pupils to look at a spectrum of views, within the class, on issues that can be viewed from strongly opposing but justifiable positions. Present the two opposing positions to the class, being careful to ensure that they are equally balanced i.e. that one is not obviously more justifiable than the other. Using the front of the classroom or other appropriate space, lay a piece of string on the floor to represent the spectrum of opinions which lie between the two views. Give each student a few minutes to consider the two views and then to stand along the spectrum in a position which reflects their views. When they are all in position, ask them to talk to the students nearest to them (maximum 3 students in a group) and explain why they are standing there. Then, provided there is a reasonable spread of opinion, ask the pupils to identify someone who is somewhere on the other half of the spectrum i.e. holds a different opinion to them, and to discuss in groups of 2 or 3 why they hold their positions. Finally ask the pupils to regroup according to where they now stand after their discussions.

### Yes, and... Debates

Divide the class into groups of 4/5. Explain to the groups that a statement for discussion will be read aloud by the teacher. Pupils will be expected to discuss this statement in their group. However, each pupil must begin their contribution with the words "yes, and....." followed by the comment they wish to make. Pupils may find this concept difficult at first, so a few examples may be appropriate. Allow time for feedback not just on the topic, but also on the process of beginning each statement with the words "yes, and....".

### Thinking Through Challenges

This thinking tool is useful for getting pupils to think about their own responses to an issue - but in a safe way which considers the consequences of each choice.

1. Distribute a template to each student with three headings; Challenge, Choices, Consequences
2. Place a dilemma/topic/suggestion in the Challenge box at the top of the template e.g. Someone tells a homophobic joke
3. Ask the pupils 'How could someone respond?' What choices do they have? (Remember to frame questions in general terms rather than pointedly asking a student what they would do). Explore all options e.g. you could laugh, you could challenge it there and then, you could say nothing, you could say nothing then but challenge it later.
4. Ask the pupils to record these choices in the template.
5. Then ask the students to consider the possible consequences for each choice and to record these in the consequence paths that lead from each doorway.
6. Take feedback and discuss with the pupils how to respond to challenges in a socially responsible way which will not place them in undue danger
7. Discuss the risks and challenges associated with taking a stand.



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### Other People's Shoes

Pose a question for the pupils (e.g. Why are certain groups marginalised in our society? What should the government do to tackle poverty?)

Remember to frame the questions in the structural/public sphere.

1. Provide each pupil with a shoe print template.
2. Ask them to record their answer to the question inside the shoes
3. Collect all the shoe templates and redistribute to the students ensuring that nobody has their own shoe print template. You can do this in a number of ways.
4. Tell the students that they must now represent, argue or discuss the view on their shoe print for the rest of the class.
5. Hold a discussion, based on the original question posed, asking the students how it felt to represent/argue/discuss someone else's position.

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